20 Years of Quality Programming

Research Notes

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How The Public Looks At The Aims Of Public Television

By Salvina Cappello

> *If you see a shark coming you can shoot it, but a bunch of ducks can sneak up on you and peck you to death and you can't do anything about it.*
>
> Scott Sassa, Turner Network Television

Fragmentation and competition in television is causing pressure among all broadcasters, commercial and noncommercial alike. Audience erosion among network affiliates and some other television broadcasters was the topic of the '80s, but it remains unresolved at the onset of the '90s. Additionally, political turmoil abroad and changes in immigration policy at home have altered the composition of the American population. Therefore, the public whom public broadcasters seek to serve is also changed.

What must public broadcasters do to serve this public effectively?

Do the goals outlined by the first Carnegie Commission more than 20 years ago have the same relevance to how public broadcasting serves the public today?

We decided to take these issues to the people whom public broadcasters want to reach -- the American public. CPB commissioned the Roper Organization to survey a national sample of adults who were questioned in person about some of the original goals and objectives of public broadcasting. The question was twofold: first, how important do respondents believe it is for public television to meet each of eight goals described in the Carnegie Commission report *Public Television: A Program for Action*, and second, how would they grade public television's performance in meeting each goal?

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Most Americans consider the original goals and objectives of public television to be important. Of particular importance are objectives relating to children's programming and news and public affairs. People believe that educating children, especially preschoolers, is the most important goal of public television (91 percent consider it "very important" or "important") and also where public television performs best (performance grade = A-).

Almost equally important as an objective for public television in the minds of Americans is effectively increasing the understanding of news events and public affairs. People graded public television's performance on that score at a B+, which could imply room for improvement.

Conversely, two objectives that seem noticeably less important in the public's view concern innovation in the performing arts and what might be called the "golden oldies," which the Carnegie Commission described as "preserving the best that television has to offer" series. These categories received importance ratings of 69 percent and 67 percent respectively. Public television received a B grade for performance on both counts.

DO the results differ between those who view public television and those who do not? Interestingly, the objectives score very similarly in rank order for both importance and performance, but the actual importance ratings and performance grades that viewers give are higher than those from non-viewers. Among non-viewers, public television received especially low grades in providing a platform for diverse social groups, in showing the current and latest things in the performing arts and preserving and bringing back to the screen the best programs from television's past. Fortunately, non-viewers consider these objectives to be considerably less important, as well.

African-Americans attach only marginally greater importance to public television's role in "providing a platform for diverse social groups, such as ethnic minorities, to express themselves, both artistically and politically" than does the general public. Furthermore, African-Americans gave public television the same performance grade for delivering this to the American population as did the general public (B). It is possible that the African-Americans who were surveyed simply do not think that this objective should be the primary focus of the public television agenda.

Like the general public, African-Americans see the informal education of children, especially pre-schoolers, as the most important role of public television (88% importance rating). Similarly, the second most important role for public television that African-Americans identified is increasing public awareness and understanding of news events and public affairs (87%). The performance grades, B+ and B respectively, though, show that mostAfrican-Americans think there is room for improvement in these areas.

Interestingly, downscale respondents (in terms of income and education) were overall tougher graders of public television performance.

Regardless of household income, the education of young children and the need to increase the people's understanding of news events and public affairs remained the two most important objectives. People in households with income of less than $15,000 a year, consider increasing people's understanding of news events and public affairs to be the most critical objective (90% importance rating); with the education of children a close second (86%). These people graded public television at a B+ in both areas.

In households with an income of more than $35,000, educating children and fostering increased understanding of news events and public affairs were equally rated at 94%. These households graded public television's performance in educating children an A -- one of the highest grades received from any group for performance on any objective. The gave public television a B+ for performance in increasing knowledge of news events and public affairs.

Among college educated respondents, educating children and increasing people's understanding of news events and public affairs were rated equally important (93% importance rating). High school graduates with no college background also rate these two objectives the most important, but at a 90 percent rating. Non-high school graduates rated children's education as the most important (86%) and increasing the people's understanding of news events and public affairs second (83%).

Politically and socially active people, too, give their highest importance ratings for helping informally to educate children (94%), and for increasing people's understanding of news events and public affairs (94%), but they also attach considerable importance to an objective considered somewhat less important by other groups -- increasing Americans' knowledge of other nations and of the great variety of cultures within our own nation (92%). Although these respondents were fairly complimentary, with the grade for children's education by public broadcasters (A), the grades that they gave public television for its performance in increasing public awareness of news events and public affairs (B+) and for increasing Americans' knowledge of other nations and cultures (B) reflects their view that there is considerable room for improvement in these areas.

(These findings are derived from a Roper Organization survey in October 1989 in which a nationwide cross-section of 1,974 men and women 18 years of age and older were interviewed in person. A multistage, stratified probability sample was used.)

Table 1. Public Expectations For Public Television

(Among the general public)

Objectives	Importance Rating	Performance Grade
1. To help educate children informally, especially pre-schoolers	91	A-
2. To increase people's understanding of news and public affairs	90	B+
3. To increase American's knowledge of other nations and the great variety of cultures within our nation	86	B
4. To provide analysis and interpretation of important issues and ideas	80	B
5. To make the best of the performing arts -- such as symphony orchestras, theaters, and ballet companies -- more accessible to people	73	B
6. To offer a platform for diverse social groups, such as ethnic minorities, to express themselves, both artistically and politically	72	B
7. To show the current and latest things in the performing arts	69	B
8. To preserve and bring back to the screen the best programs from television's past	67	B

Source: Roper Report 89-10

Table 2. Public Television's Role In Providing a Platform For Diverse Programming

	Importance Rating	Performance Grade
General Public	72	B
Public Television Viewers	78	B
Public Television Non-Viewers	63	C
African-Americans*	75	B

*Sample Size = 218